

False starts

Hidden agenders Sydney Brenner



As many people more important than myself have come to realize, sexual harassment is taken very seriously, particularly in the new world. Although it is not yet in the class of murder, arson and bank robbery, it is now a common

lace-collar crime and quite easy to commit, even by accident. I know this because I once attended a meeting by mistake and listened for a few minutes to a talk on sexual harassment in the veterinary industry of southern California, before I realized that the speaker was not going to discuss the folding problem.

My first encounter with sexual harassment was in a notice sent to me by the administrator of a research institute. I immediately replied asking where and how I could apply for it as I had not had any for some time. There followed a visit from the lady concerned, who sternly lectured me on the subject and who would not accept my excuse that I was a PI (politically incorrect, not principal investigator). Since then I have been extremely careful, especially in walking down corridors in the laboratory, making sure that my unsteady progress can not be interpreted as making “blocking or impeding movements”, a hallmark of the offence.

Imagine my surprise, then, when I received an invitation to a party a few weeks ago with the words “Girlfriend ... is something bugging you?”, emblazoned in large black letters over a pale leaf-green background. An organization called Women Incorporated was exhorting

me to attend a do — in sneakers or stilettos — and to join San Diego’s most successful women business owners in a warm, friendly, fun atmosphere. I was told I would find no big egos, stuffy attitudes or hidden agendas, which I assumed was a veiled reference to the absence of men from this organization.

At first I thought that this was a joke played on me by one of my friends but a brief investigation showed that the organisation and the card were authentic. I checked that the card was actually addressed to me, which indeed it was, and that gave the game away. Like Leslie, my first name can be attached to either sex, and there are probably few self-respecting male Sydneys in southern California.

Did I go to the party and, more importantly, what did I wear? I confess that I was strongly tempted to put on my stilettos and a sequined ballroom gown *à la* Danny la Rue. However, as about one hundred women were expected to attend the party, my appearance there could have been horribly misinterpreted and I might even have had a class action brought against me. So, reluctantly, I decided not to go, even though I have entertained a secret desire for elaborate cross dressing ever since, many years ago, my trousers were accidentally dissolved in concentrated NaOH in the laboratory on a Saturday afternoon. Of necessity, I made a skirt out of a large paper bag (used for disposing of petri dishes) and was walking — hobbling is perhaps a better description — home, when I heard a motor car pull up behind me. The two policemen who jumped from the car and picked me up must have been disappointed when, in response to their considerate questions about my condition, I asked them whether they knew anything about ion-exchange chromatography as this was crucial for my explanation.

I have now decided to put the ambiguities of my name to good use

and to start Aunt Sydney’s agony column to deal with all the difficult problems encountered in laboratory life. I urge my readers to write to me but, in the mean time, by sheer coincidence, my first letter arrived today.

Dear Aunt Sydney

I am a graduate student in the department of Molecular Biology at the University of (name withheld). I am 6’4” tall, weigh 220 lbs, of a pleasant disposition and thought good looking by my friends, who particularly admire my black beard. My outside interest is tree-felling. My research supervisor (the head of the group), is a real terror and is making my life a misery. She is 4’6”, weighs 100 lbs and does not have a black beard. She is said to beat graduate students, but in all fairness I have not seen or experienced anything like this. But she singled me out the other day and was really quite nasty using words such as “dumb oaf” and “stupid hulk”. It is true that I mixed up two gels and forgot to do the control experiment, and I did leave the centrifuge running all night, but I didn’t let all the mice escape. What shall I do? I have reached the end of my tether and plan to give up molecular biology for Elizabethan poetry.

Yours, S.G.

Dear S.G.

If you can prove that you are being treated this way because you are a male and not because you are a graduate student, you could bring an action for sexual harassment. I fear this may be difficult, however, and as you will know, society and the law offer no protection to graduate students. The best thing to do is get your PhD as quickly as possible. Enquire whether your university has a Remedial Science department to help you in the laboratory. I strongly advise you not to go anywhere near an English department as conditions there are much, much worse.

Yours, Aunt Sydney